

Building relationships, one practice at a time



BY KENDALL ZOLLER AND ANTONIA ISSA LAHERA

As leadership coaches, our work in schools has taken us to many places over many years. We have worked with some of the most marginalized groups of students and some of the most privileged. As we have pursued a path of equity for all students, teachers, families, and communities, we have developed a framework to develop, nurture, and grow collaborative relationships. We call it HeartSpace (Lahera & Zoller, 2021).

There is ample evidence that the quality of relationships has a major

impact on how much learning will occur in any school setting. But, in our experience, most schools do not spend enough time on cultivating relationships in a way that is deep, meaningful, or sustained. Our approach addresses that gap by focusing on a deepening of identities and ways we relate with each other.

We believe that a focus on the knowledge and skills around teaching and learning, although vital, is not sufficient. We need new systems that embed the continuous building and developing of relationships to help educators address the many adaptive

challenges we're facing today.

This focus on relationships can lead to more energy, greater synergy, and a space for creativity and innovation. We also find that the shift in the dynamics of relationships creates more time for teaching and learning and greater productivity because less time is wasted on unproductive or even toxic relationships.

THE FOUNDATIONS

HeartSpace is a structured set of practices designed to maximize interaction and community to bring meaning, connection, growth, and

fulfillment as groups work together. We created these practices using research on equity, relationships, community building, group development, and participatory action (including Freire, 2000; Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008; Heifetz & Linsky, 2009; Banks, 2006, 2015; Block, 2018; Bolman & Deal, 2017). As a result, the practices honor social justice, equity, and individual culture while fostering agency and leadership, and providing a space for people to grow together.

In these relationship-building practices, everyone has a voice. Identities are honored, and there is no power structure. The space is a fair and just one that elevates all perspectives, all cultures, and all identities and is grounded in four ideas:

- People need ways to know themselves.
- People need opportunities to get to know others.
- People need to know how to collaborate.
- People need to be focused on things that are bigger than themselves.

A set of foundational principles supports these ideas, gives the practices focus, and serves as a series of checkpoints or diagnostic tools. These principles are necessary for any group to be successful with the practices. (See box at right.)

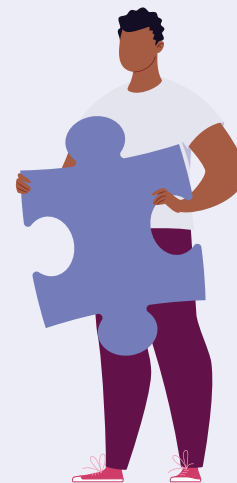
EXAMPLE PRACTICES

The following examples from our work in schools illustrate how leaders and staff can use the practices. In each case, we worked with leaders to identify HeartSpace practices that could help them tackle pressing issues in ways that deepened relationships and established a stronger foundation for moving forward.

4 DIRECTIONS

At a school we'll call Pace Elementary (a pseudonym), the opening of the 2021-22 school year was full of transitions. Not only were staff and students moving back to in-person learning after more than a year of remote learning caused by the pandemic, but the community was navigating a change in leadership and a restructuring of many staff roles.

A former leader moved from a co-principal role to a special education role, the school had a new principal and assistant principal, and a longtime leader had left the site. All of this change needed to be acknowledged and honored so that the community could forge a way forward. The new principal recognized the need to create an intentional space and time for this work, knowing that, if the space was not created, the staff would continue to be in disarray and student learning would be negatively impacted.



FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF HEARTSPACE PRACTICES

1. **Service:** Give to others, especially those in need.
2. **Relational living:** Be mindful of ourselves and others to build healthy, sustainable connections, communities, workplaces, and cultures.
3. **Responsibility:** Take ownership of our actions and those of our communities and cultures.
4. **Hope:** Expect and work toward positive outcomes.
5. **Persistence:** Learn from setbacks; reflect and reiterate.
6. **Gratefulness:** Feel and show kindness and thankfulness.
7. **Curiosity:** Approach the world with wonder and discover its delights.
8. **Vulnerability:** Share authentically and connect meaningfully.
9. **Humility:** Be open to learning from anyone.
10. **Creativity:** Express yourself!
11. **Joy:** Have fun!

Under the principal's guidance, the leadership team started with a practice called 4 Directions. This practice helps groups pause and assess the moment when changes happen. It asks participants to identify a shift they are trying to make in their work and explore its impact with colleagues.

The practice draws on the symbolic importance of the four cardinal directions (east, west, north, and south) in many Indigenous cultures, creating four spaces in the room that represent four approaches to dealing with change: illumination, the future, lessons learned, and our survival. Participants choose one of these approaches and discuss it with other participants who also gravitated to that part of the room, reflecting together on where they are now, where they need to go, and how they will get there.

Pace leaders rehearsed this process as a team and posted the direction signs at the four corners of a large meeting room. To kick things off, the principal asked a warm-up question: When you think about taking the perfect vacation, what direction is the place you want to go? As the teachers, with surprised looks, turned and talked with each other, their nervous tension shifted to listening, laughter, rapport, and interest. The principal then transitioned the group to the 4 Directions activity, explaining that "today, you will have an opportunity to consider where you are and how you want to shift to where you want to go."

After participants selected a corner and shared their thinking with a small group, the principal honored each corner by acknowledging the chosen shifts, the commitment to find ways to make those shifts, and the power of choice in doing so.

This HeartSpace practice took only 20 minutes, but the impact lasted well beyond any expectation of the leadership team. In staff interviews and surveys after one session, every person reported a renewed sense of connection with others. They were energized and more hopeful than before the meeting.

This HeartSpace practice took only 20 minutes, but the impact lasted well beyond any expectation of the leadership team. In staff interviews and surveys after one session, every person reported a renewed sense of connection with others. They were energized and more hopeful than before the meeting.

We spoke to staff members about a week after this session and asked how they were doing. There was a continued sense of connection and empathy. One teacher said that there was a renewed sense of the power of the collective — her feeling that together they had the energy, spirit, and hope to make a shift that matters.

DUCT TAPE

At another school, which we'll call Ellison, the school culture had gone from tense to toxic. Staff bickered constantly and blamed families, students, and each other for their increasing challenges and stresses. Misunderstandings and hostilities mushroomed.

In our leadership coaching sessions, the principal said she knew her staff needed a space where empathy and understanding could flourish. One of her goals was to provide a place for people to express what they were feeling, how they had been impacted by the recent tension, and how they could move beyond it. She chose to try a practice we call Duct Tape.

This practice, which is designed to prevent and fix misunderstandings, is based on the fact that duct tape can hold almost anything together. In small groups, participants discuss ways they have addressed misunderstandings outside of work and identify how they can apply some of the most constructive

strategies to their current context.

Ellison's principal began by asking her staff to identify their current emotions. She then asked table groups to discuss this question: How much time and energy do misunderstandings take up, and what gets left behind? This was followed by a conversation on how people fix misunderstandings in life.

Each table group generated a list of ideas and chose one to write on a piece of duct tape. Each group posted its duct tape on a chart, and groups considered and discussed all of the ideas posted. The next step was to see what solutions on the list might be helpful for the current misunderstandings they were navigating together.

As soon as the collective began to focus on actions they could take, the mood and energy in the room shifted. There was positive talk, solutions were identified, and people were connected. Everyone had a chance to share both grievances and solutions. Hearing other ideas from staff members opened the door for even more expansive thinking.

The principal was both excited and relieved about the potential to move this group forward. She attributed much of the success to the power of giving space for all voices to be heard without judgment.

HOW TO USE THE PRACTICES

HeartSpace practices can be used separately or in combination. Each practice is structured the same way so that the leader or facilitator can read and easily follow the script. The practices (which can be found in Lahera & Zoller, 2021) include the following components:

- The intention: Sets a mindset for facilitating.
- The why: Establishes the foundation for the deeper purpose from the relationship and organizational perspectives.
- The principles: Provides a broader perspective in thinking about how to navigate the complexity of human relationships.

- Preparation and duration: Explains what participants need to do the practice and how long it might take.
- Community builder: Establishes the concept of community first in the work of schools.
- Ways of being: Identifies the mental preparation and mindsets that best support the practice.
- Impact statement: Sets the tone of the moment.
- Outline: Defines the framework of the experience.
- Action: Details the script of the practice to follow.
- Closure: Anchors the learning from the experience.

The HeartSpace practices are designed for full faculty gatherings, leadership teams, and departments. We recommend starting by embedding practices into meetings or times together. This will help people become accustomed to the structure and begin the shift in culture. Forming a new habit takes intention and regular use,

and the repeated use of these practices will embed a space and place for relationship-building in your culture.

When building a collective culture, rituals and ongoing practices are important for nurturing meaningful time together and growing a group's connection and efficacy. That investment in relationship-building is essential for schools to become places of equity and excellence where identity, voice, and agency flourish as we prepare the next generation of learners and leaders.

REFERENCES

- Banks, J. (2006).** *Race, culture, and education.* Routledge.
- Banks, J. (2015).** *Cultural diversity and education* (6th ed.). Routledge.
- Block, P. (2018).** *Community: The structure of belonging.* Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Bolman, L.G. & Deal, T. (2017).** *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership.* Jossey-Bass.
- Duncan-Andrade, J. & Morell, E. (2008).** *The art of critical pedagogy:*

Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools. Peter Lang Publishing.

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed). Bloomsbury.

Heifetz, R.A., Linsky, M., & Grashow, A. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organization and the world.* Harvard Business School Publishing.

Lahera, A.I. & Zoller, K. (2021). *HeartSpace: Practices and rituals to awaken, emerge, evolve, and flourish at work and in life.* Word & Deed Publishing.

•
Kendall Zoller (kvzoller@sierra-training.com) is a global consultant, president of Sierra Training Associates, and associate professor of educational leadership. Antonia Issa Lahera (aissalahera@gmail.com) is an emeritus professor and independent consultant. ■

Asking good questions is a leader's superpower

Continued from p. 41

effort over time. It's up to you how to start, but for most of us, success is incremental rather than sudden.

I recommend starting with one aspect of questioning, such as one of the six I've described here, and practice it, giving yourself some time to get better at it until it starts to feel somewhat natural. Continue to practice until you don't have to think about it. Then you'll be ready to focus on another aspect.

Learning to ask good questions and truly listen to the answers is an ongoing

process that challenges us to continually look inward to ourselves and outward to others. We are never finished with that growth, just as we are never finished developing relationships.

Over the years, I've often found that just when I think I've figured out what makes another person tick, an action or a response takes me by surprise and I'm reminded that I'm not a watchmaker. But I don't have to be a watchmaker to keep asking good questions and letting the other person tell me what they think, what they need, and how I can help them become

the best leader they can be for their colleagues and students.

REFERENCE

Kouzes, J.M. & Posner, B. Z. (2006). *The leadership challenge* (Vol. 3). John Wiley & Sons.

•
Charles Mason (cmason.557@gmail.com) is retired superintendent of Mountain Brook City Schools in Alabama and a former president of the board of trustees at NSDC (now Learning Forward). ■